

## CHAPTER XXI

In the front window of one of the row of little flat-faced brick houses on a narrow street in Manchester, Dowie sat holding Henrietta's new baby upon her lap. They were what is known as "weekly" houses, their rent being paid by the week and they were very small. There was a parlour about the size of a compartment in a workbox, there was a still smaller room behind it which was called a dining room and there was a diminutive kitchen in which all the meals were eaten unless there was "company to tea" which in these days was almost unknown. Dowie had felt it very small when she first came to it from the fine spaces and heights of the house in Eaton Square and found it seemingly full of very small children and a hysterically weeping girl awaiting the impending arrival of one who would be smaller than the rest.

"You'll never stay here," said Henrietta, crying and clutching the untidy half-buttoned front of her blouse. "You come straight from duchesses and grandeur and you don't know how people like us live. How can you stand us and our dirt, Aunt Sarah Ann?"

"There needn't be dirt, Henrietta, my girl," said Dowie with quite uncritical courage. "There wouldn't be if you were yourself, poor lass. I'm not a duchess, you know. I've only been a respectable servant. And I'm going to see you through your trouble."

Her sober, kindly capableness evolved from the slovenly little house and the untended children, from the dusty rooms and neglected kitchen the kind of order and neatness which had been plain to see in Robin's more fortune-favoured apartment. The children became as fresh and neat as Robin's nursery self. They wore clean pinafores and began to behave tidily at table.

"I don't know how you do it, Aunt Sarah Ann," sighed Henrietta. But she washed her blouse and put buttons on it.

"It's just seeing things and picking up and giving a touch here and there," said Dowie. She bought little comforts almost every day and Henrietta was cheered by cups of hot tea in the afternoon and found herself helping to prepare decent meals and sitting down to them with appetite before a clean tablecloth. She began to look better and recovered her pleasure in sitting at the front window to watch the people passing by and notice how many new black dresses and bonnets went to church each Sunday.

When the new baby was born there was neither turmoil nor terror.

"Somehow it was different from the other times. It seemed sort of natural," Henrietta said. "And it's so quiet to lie like this in a comfortable clean bed, with everything in its place and nothing upset in the room. And a bright bit of fire in the grate--and a tidy, swept-up

hearth--and the baby breathing so soft in his flannels."

She was a pretty thing and quite unfit to take care of herself even if she had had no children. Dowie knew that she was not beset by sentimental views of life and that all she wanted was a warm and comfortable corner to settle down into. Some masculine creature would be sure to begin to want her very soon. It was only to be hoped that youth and flightiness would not descend upon her--though three children might be supposed to form a barrier. But she had a girlish figure and her hair was reddish gold and curly and her full and not too small mouth was red and curly also. The first time she went to church in her little widow's bonnet with the reddish gold showing itself under the pathetic little white crêpe border, she was looked at a good deal. Especially was she looked at by an extremely respectable middle-aged widower who had been a friend of her dead husband's. His wife had been dead six years, he had a comfortable house and a comfortable shop which had thriven greatly through a connection with army supplies.

He came to see Henrietta and he had the good sense to treat Dowie as if she were her mother. He explained himself and his circumstances to her and his previous friendship for her nephew. He asked Dowie if she objected to his coming to see her niece and bringing toys to the children.

"I'm fond of young ones. I wanted 'em myself. I never had any," he said bluntly. "There's plenty of room in my house. It's a cheerful place with

good solid furniture in it from top to bottom. There's one room we used to call 'the Nursery' sometimes just for a joke--not often. I choked up one day when I said it and Mary Jane burst out crying. I could do with six."

He was stout about the waist but his small blue eyes sparkled in his red face and Henrietta's slimness unromantically but practically approved of him.

One evening Dowie came into the little parlour to find her sitting upon his knee and he restrained her when she tried to rise hastily.

"Don't get up, Hetty," he said. "Your Aunt Sarah Ann'll understand. We've had a talk and she's a sensible woman. She says she'll marry me, Mrs. Dowson--as soon as it's right and proper."

"Yes, we've had a talk," Dowie replied in her nice steady voice. "He'll be a good husband to you, Henrietta--kind to the children."

"I'd be kind to them even if she wouldn't marry me," the stout lover answered. "I want 'em. I've told myself sometimes that I ought to have been the mother of six--not the father but the mother. And I'm not joking."

"I don't believe you are, Mr. Jenkinson," said Dowie.

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As she sat before the window in the scrap of a parlour and held the sleeping new baby on her comfortable lap, she was thinking of this and feeling glad that poor Jem's widow and children were so well provided for. It would be highly respectable and proper. The ardour of Mr. Jenkinson would not interfere with his waiting until Henrietta's weeds could be decorously laid aside and then the family would be joyfully established in his well-furnished and decent house. During his probation he would visit Henrietta and bring presents to the children and unostentatiously protect them all and "do" for them.

"They won't really need me now that Henrietta's well and cheerful and has got some one to make much of her and look after her," Dowie reflected, trotting the baby gently. "I can't help believing her grace would take me on again if I wrote and asked her. And I should be near Miss Robin, thank God. It seems a long time since--"

She suddenly leaned forward and looked up the narrow street where the wind was blowing the dust about and whirling some scraps of paper. She watched a moment and then lifted the baby and stood up so that she might make more sure of the identity of a tall gentleman she saw approaching. She only looked at him for a few seconds and then she left the parlour quickly and went to the back room where she had been aware of Mr. Jenkinson's voice rumbling amiably along as a background to her thoughts.

"Henrietta," she said, "his lordship's coming down the street and he's coming here. I'm afraid something's happened to Miss Robin or her grace. Perhaps I'm needed at Eaton Square. Please take the baby."

"Give him to me," said Jenkinson and it was he who took him with quite an experienced air.

Henrietta was agitated.

"Oh, my goodness! Aunt Sarah Ann! I feel all shaky. I never saw a lord--and he's a marquis, isn't it? I shan't know what to do."

"You won't have to do anything," answered Dowie. "He'll only say what he's come to say and go away."

She went out of the room as quickly as she had come into it because she heard the sound of the cheap little door knocker. She was pale with anxiety when she opened the door and Lord Coombe saw her troubled look and understood its reason.

"I am afraid I have rather alarmed you, Dowie," he said as he stepped into the narrow lobby and shook hands with her.

"It's not bad news of her grace or Miss Robin?" she faltered.

"I have come to ask you to come back to London. Her grace is well but Miss Robin needs you," was what he said.

But Dowie knew the words did not tell her everything she was to hear. She took him into the parlour for which she realised he was much too tall. When she discreetly closed the door after he had entered, he said seriously, "Thank you," before he seated himself. And she knew that this meant that they must be undisturbed.

"Will you sit down too," he said as she stood a moment waiting respectfully. "We must talk together."

She took a chair opposite to him and waited respectfully again. Yes, he had something grave on his mind. He had come to tell her something--to ask her questions perhaps--to require something of her. Her superiors had often required things of her in the course of her experience--such things as they would not have asked of a less sensible and reliable woman. And she had always been ready.

When he began to talk to her he spoke as he always did, in a tone which sounded unemotional but held one's attention. But his face had changed since she had last seen it. It had aged and there was something different in the eyes. That was the War. Since the War began so many faces had altered.

During the years in the slice of a house he had never talked to her very

much. It was with Mademoiselle he had talked and his interviews with her had not taken place in the nursery. How was it then that he seemed to know her so well. Had Mademoiselle told him that she was a woman to be trusted safely with any serious and intimate confidence--that being given any grave secret to shield, she would guard it as silently and discreetly as a great lady might guard such a thing if it were personal to her own family--as her grace herself might guard it. That he knew this fact without a shadow of doubt was subtly manifest in every word he spoke, in each tone of his voice. There was strange dark trouble to face--and keep secret--and he had come straight to her--Sarah Ann Dowson--because he was sure of her and knew her ways. It was her ways he knew and understood--her steadiness and that she had the kind of manners that keep a woman from talking about things and teach her how to keep other people from being too familiar and asking questions. And he knew what that kind of manners was built on--just decent faithfulness and honest feeling. He didn't say it in so many words, of course, but as Dowie listened it was exactly as if he said it in gentleman's language.

England was full of strange and cruel tragedies. And they were not all tragedies of battle and sudden death. Many of them were near enough to seem even worse--if worse could be. Dowie had heard some hints of them and had wondered what the world was coming to. As her visitor talked her heart began to thump in her side. Whatsoever had happened was no secret from her grace. And together she and his lordship were going to keep it a secret from the world. Dowie could scarcely have told what phrase or word at last suddenly brought up before her a picture of the nursery in



the house in Mayfair--the feeling of a warm soft childish body pressed close to her knee, the look of a tender, dewy-eyed small face and the sound of a small yearning voice saying:

"I want to kiss you, Dowie." And so hearing it, Dowie's heart cried out to itself, "Oh! Dear Lord!"

"It's Miss Robin that trouble's come to," involuntarily broke from her.

"A trouble she must be protected in. She cannot protect herself." For a few seconds he sat and looked at her very steadily. It was as though he were asking a question. Dowie did not know she was going to rise from her chair. But for some reason she got up and stood quite firmly before him. And her good heart went thump-thump-thump.

"Your lordship," she said and in spite of the thumping her voice actually did not shake. "It was one of those War weddings. And perhaps he's dead."

Then it was Lord Coombe who left his chair.

"Thank you, Dowie," he said and before he began to walk up and down the tiny room she felt as if he made a slight bow to her.

She had said something that he had wished her to say. She had removed

some trying barrier for him instead of obliging him to help her to cross it and perhaps stumbling on her way. She had neither stumbled nor clambered, she had swept it away out of his path and hers. That was because she knew Miss Robin and had known her from her babyhood.

Though for some time he walked to and fro slowly as he talked she saw that it was easier for him to complete the relation of his story. But as it proceeded it was necessary for her to make an effort to recall herself to a realisation of the atmosphere of the parlour and the narrow street outside the window--and she was glad to be assisted by the amiable rumble of Mr. Jenkinson's voice as heard from the back room when she found herself involuntarily leaning forward in her chair, vaguely conscious that she was drawing short breaths, as she listened to what he was telling her. The things she was listening to stood out from a background of unreality so startling. She was even faintly tormented by shadowy memories of a play she had seen years ago at Drury Lane. And Drury Lane incidents were of a world so incongruously remote from the house in Eaton Square and her grace's clever aquiline ivory face--and his lordship with his quiet bearing and his unromantic and elderly, tired fineness. And yet he was going to undertake to do a thing which was of the order of deed the sober everyday mind could only expect from the race of persons known as "heroes" in theatres and in books. And he was noticeably and wholly untheatrical about it. His plans were those of a farseeing and practical man in every detail. To Dowie the working perfection of his preparations was amazing. They included every contingency and seemed to forget nothing and ignore no possibility. He

had thought of things the cleverest woman might have thought of, he had achieved effects as only a sensible man accustomed to power and obedience could have achieved them. And from first to last he kept before Dowie the one thing which held the strongest appeal. In her helpless heartbreak and tragedy Robin needed her as she needed no one else in the world.

"She is so broken and weakened that she may not live," he said in the end. "No one can care for her as you can."

"I can care for her, poor lamb. I'll come when your lordship's ready for me, be it soon or late."

"Thank you, Dowie," he said again. "It will be soon."

And when he shook hands with her and she opened the front door for him, she stood and watched him, thinking very deeply as he walked down the street with the wind-blown dust and scraps of paper whirling about him.